



# COUNTERDRUG

## Operations in U.S. Pacific Command

By JAMES C. KRASKA

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The social and health impact of illegal drug use amounts to \$70 billion in illness, death, and crime each year in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Drugs destroy families and overwhelm the criminal justice, health, and social service systems. Most Americans identify it as one of our most acute problems.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in the source nations of Asia and South America, crime and profits related to trafficking in drugs erode emerging democratic institutions and legitimate economic activity. These worldwide effects make drug trafficking a major international security issue.

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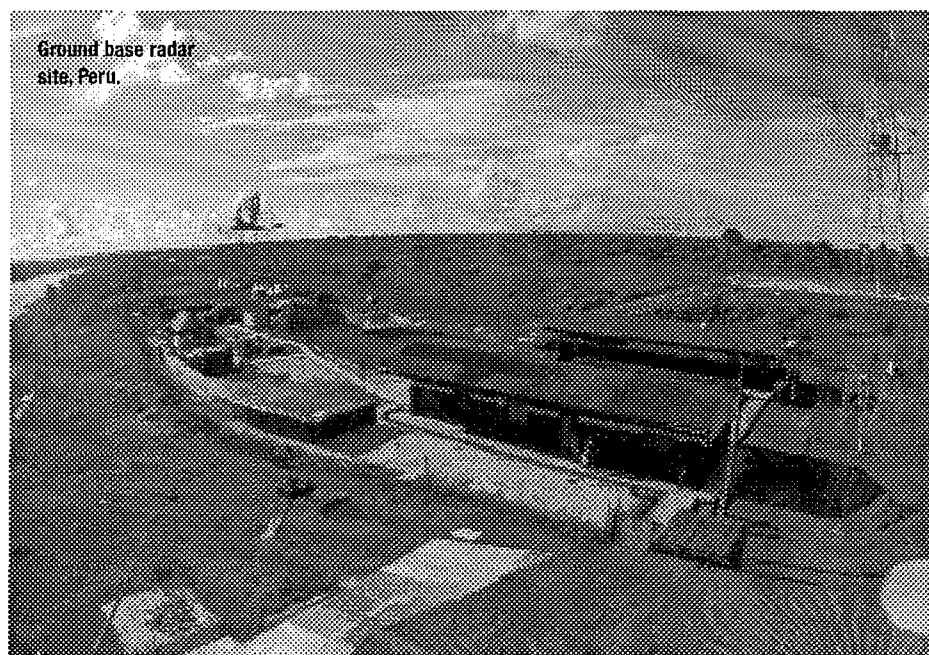
## DOD Counterdrug Support

At the height of the cocaine epidemic of the late 1980s both President Bush and Congress recognized that assets unique to the military could bolster counterdrug efforts. Legislation enacted in 1989 tasked DOD to serve as lead agency in detecting and monitoring illegal drugs entering this country. The Armed Forces were also authorized to provide counterdrug-related training and other support to domestic and foreign law enforcement agencies. The National Defense Authorization Act of 1990 broadened that basic mandate to include intelligence analysis and linguistic expertise, the establishment of dedicated counterdrug C<sup>3</sup>I centers, and air and sea transportation.

The President has outlined five comprehensive strategic goals for reducing illegal drug use in the United States and assisting friendly nations in combatting both consumption and trafficking. Each is underpinned by supporting goals; the first three focus on demand reduction, drug-related crime, and health and social costs. Studies indicate that demand reduction policies are among the most effective means of reducing drug use among Americans. Success depends primarily on law enforcement, schools, and social institutions. In cooperation with other agencies on the Federal, state, and local levels, the military plays a principal role in supporting the fourth goal, shielding our land, sea, and air frontiers from the drug threat, and the fifth goal, disrupting foreign and domestic sources. By creating several geographically-focused joint task forces, DOD exercises a lead role in the detection and monitoring of international drug traffic and supports law enforcement efforts.

### Counterdrug Task Force

U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) relies on Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) West for support of national counterdrug objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. Both Joint Task Force (JTF) Six and JIATFs South and East complement such efforts in their respective areas of responsibility. Located in



Ground base radar site, Peru.

1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Richard T. Kaminski)

Alameda, California, JIATF West is a standing organization with participation by all the services and the Federal law enforcement and intelligence communities. It brings resources to bear in support of law enforcement agencies and country teams to disrupt international drug traffic.

Because PACOM includes or borders on the primary production and transshipment centers for both heroin

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and cocaine, JIATF West divides counterdrug efforts between heroin flowing from Southeast Asia and cocaine shipments across the eastern Pacific. Heroin and cocaine have entirely different production and transshipment characteristics, complicating counterdrug activities. Grown domestically in Hawaii and other states and also imported from Mexico, marijuana is prevalent in the Pacific as are various synthetic methamphetamines. To identify illegal drugs coming into the United States through international waters and airspace, JIATF West maintains a vigilant detection and monitoring force comprised of aircraft and ships in the eastern Pacific. Operations

conducted by this flexible force are cued by information collected by task force assets and others.

In Asia the command has developed an operations and intelligence program that enhances efforts by American embassies and country teams working with host nations to combat heroin and other drugs. Such activity complements the President's emphasis on fostering peace, democracy, and stability abroad and makes the task force a relevant instrument in the counterdrug community. This support is directed at reducing the flow of contraband into the United States while preventing the profits of traffickers from contaminating emerging democracies and market economies.

### The Eastern Pacific

Much of the attention on illegal drugs in the last decade has focused on interdicting cocaine from South America. While cocaine use has declined 74 percent since its high in 1985, there are still 1.5 million U.S. users. Disrupting trafficking is the chief international drug control priority.<sup>3</sup> Despite a dramatic fall in the number of occasional users, frequent users have remained constant at more than

550,000. Since this category accounts for two-thirds of demand, the amount of cocaine consumed has not gone down measurably in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

Although the U.S. Government seizes 100 metric tons of cocaine per year, this interdiction has little impact on price or availability.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that up to two-thirds of the cocaine which enters this country passes either on or over the eastern Pacific en route to Mexico and ultimately the United States.<sup>6</sup> All international waters and airspace off Mexico west of 92 degrees west longitude are within the PACOM area of responsibility, and JIATF West is charged with patrolling this busy south-north smuggling corridor. The challenge for interdiction is difficult for the same reasons that bedevil operations in PACOM—dealing with time and distance. It is twice as far from Panama to San Diego as from Panama to Miami, and a lack of chokepoints in the eastern Pacific contrasts with narrow passages in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. Yet despite these obstacles, JIATF West has had considerable success, including recent operations that have led to several multi-ton seizures of cocaine or marijuana by law enforcement authorities.

### The Golden Triangle

Although widespread cocaine use has generated national concern, heroin—processed from opium grown primarily in Asia—is attracting increased attention. Heroin production has grown 60 percent in the past eight years to 360 metric tons. The number of addicts in the United States grew throughout the 1970s and 1980s and is now estimated to exceed 600,000.<sup>7</sup> Though just as deadly and addictive as cocaine, the special opiate properties of heroin permit addicts to develop long-term tolerances, thus ensuring a steady demand. It is especially dangerous because it has hooked many addicts and is viewed as a partner to cocaine, capable of moderating that drug's stimulating effects. Once regarded as the drug of dead-end derelicts, heroin is surfacing in the rock music and fashion industries and may be acquiring a chic glamour and respectability.



E-2C patrolling the Caribbean.

U.S. Navy (Michael Hinaldi)

High-purity Southeast Asian heroin dominates the American market. The PACOM area of responsibility includes the world's predominant source and transit countries for shipments entering the United States. Opium and its derivative heroin are

long and successful anti-drug campaign, Thailand produces very little heroin; but its excellent transport, financial, and communication systems are used by drug traffickers.

China, Vietnam, and Cambodia do not produce large amounts of heroin for international markets, but they include centrally located transit routes from the Golden Triangle. China, which had once all but eliminated heroin, is again experiencing a rise in consumption. Southern

China is a key route for Southeast Asian heroin destined for ports along its east coast, where the drug trade encounters shipping bound for the United States and other markets in the West. Eliminating drugs featured prominently in China's tough "Strike Hard" anti-crime crackdown of 1996, but economic growth is expected to increase heroin and opium consumption. Vietnam produces 25 metric tons of heroin per year, much for domestic use.

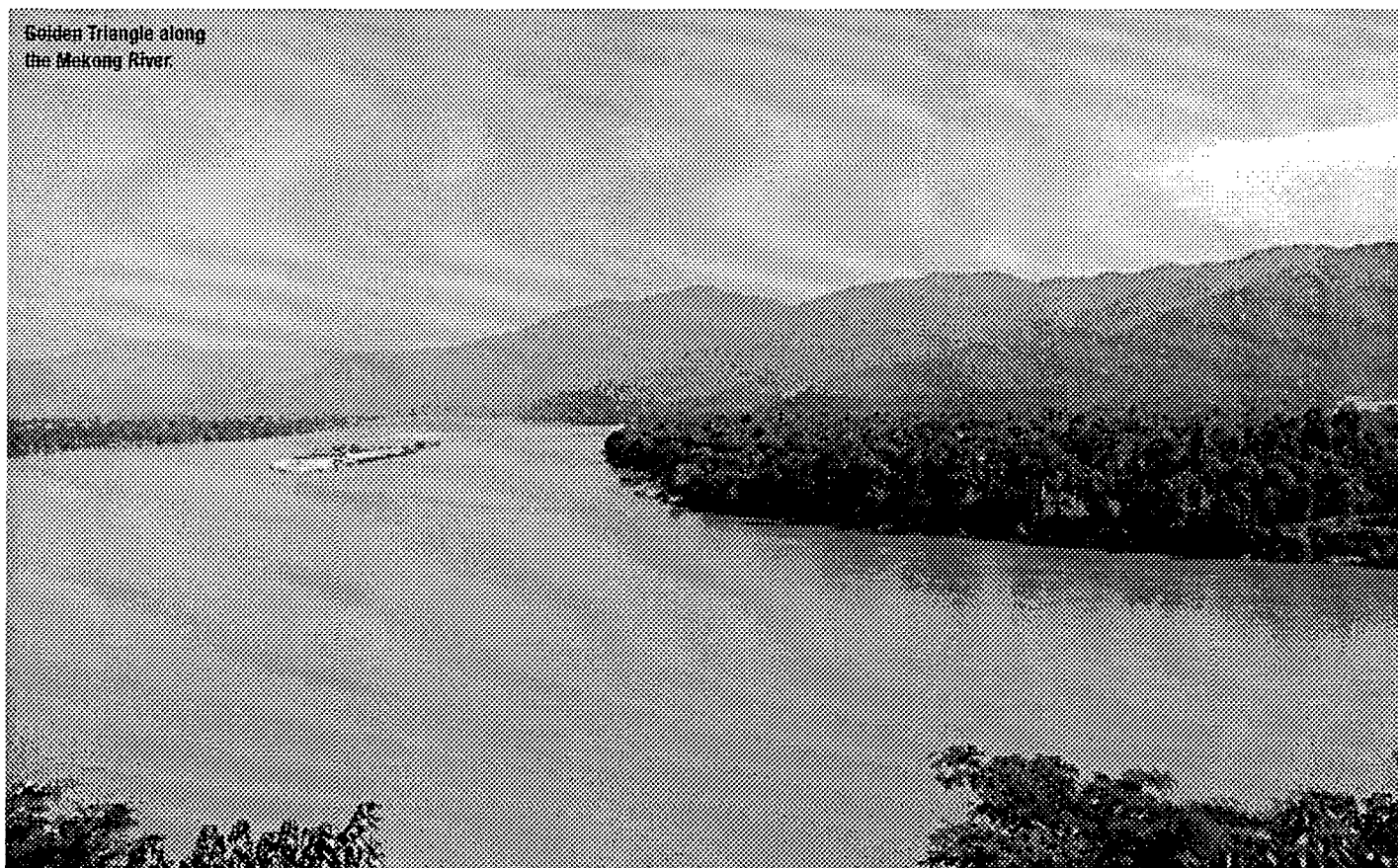
The vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean has dictated a strong maritime component to PACOM strategy and planning, and this focus is reflected in

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produced in or transshipped via every nation of Southeast and Southwest Asia. The Golden Triangle, the point along the Mekong River where Burma, Laos, and Thailand meet, produces the greatest amount of opium and refined heroin. The largest single producer of heroin is Burma, which accounts for nearly 65 percent of the estimated world opium poppy cultivation and 60 percent of potential opium gum production, enough to make 250 metric tons of refined heroin.<sup>8</sup> Production and trafficking in Burma are controlled by groups of armed ethnic bands, including the United Wa State Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army. Laos produces about 200 metric tons of opium gum, enough for 20 tons of refined heroin. Because of a



Golden Triangle along  
the Mekong River.



U.S. Navy (James C. Kraika)

counterdrug operations. Some 70–80 percent of drugs shipped to this country arrive on board every manner of commercial and noncommercial vessel from container ships to fishing boats. Burgeoning economic growth in Asia and a dramatic growth in international trade across the Pacific have provided new routes and means for heroin and opium trafficking among Asian nations and to the United States. Varied modes of shipping, ocean distances, and a lack of choke-points pose a unique challenge for the United States and its allies in Asia and make interdiction far more difficult than in the relatively confined area of the Caribbean. Large heroin caches travel through busy, sophisticated ports such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Kaohsiung in containerized shipping bound for America. The scarcity

of real-time intelligence and impracticality of examining the 4.2 million containers that enter the United States from Asia yearly make containers one of the most secure and effective ways of transporting contraband.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike cocaine traffickers, who generally operate within hierarchical, linear organizations, many separate heroin trafficking groups forge ad hoc arrangements to move drugs via Asia to their Western markets. This linked approach is especially difficult to target because traffickers rely upon ethnic or family ties. Elimination of one link is unlikely to stop the overall enterprise. Intelligence analysts at JIATF West apply analytical tools to help law enforcement agencies decipher complex criminal organizations and identify front companies and their international accomplices who import drugs into the United States. Such analysis promotes effective cooperation between U.S. and host nation law enforcement, leading to joint investigations and the extradition of heroin traffickers.

In recent decades a number of Asian cities have become banking centers and have attracted millions of dollars in drug profits and have engaged in money laundering. Intelligence analysts are able to assist law enforcement agencies in dissecting complicated financial transactions to separate natural and lawful economic activity from criminal profits.

### The Golden Crescent

Three drug producing and trafficking countries in Southwest Asia—Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran—make up the Golden Crescent, the second largest area of opium cultivation in the world according to the Department of State. Afghanistan, second only to Burma as an opium producer, grows 30 percent of the global supply, or 1,230 metric tons each year. Many heroin and morphine base laboratories are operated along the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier. Because of porous borders

High speed boats off  
San Diego.



U.S. Navy (Jeffrey S. Viano)

among Pakistan, Iran, and the central Asian region, heroin from the Golden Crescent often winds its way through Turkey and the Middle East to markets in Europe. Although Western Europe has been a major market in the past, the economic revival of Eastern Europe has bred new consumers. Because the commander in chief, U.S. Central

Command, does not receive counterdrug support, JIATF West also supports his counterdrug initiatives when approached via PACOM.

Drug trafficking, terrorism, and international crime promise to become dominant forces that will threaten both democratic order and international stability in the next few years. The PACOM counterdrug strategy is

making a difference by developing intelligence on heroin and other illegal drugs which originate in Asia, planning and executing intelligence-cued detection and monitoring operations, and targeting drug traffickers in the eastern Pacific. Analysts at JIATF West who track heroin from Southwest and Southeast Asia have perhaps the most comprehensive expertise on this subject in the U.S. Government and represent a valuable resource for law enforcement agencies. Their analysis provides a clearer picture of trafficking schemes and organizations and also aids in the identification and arrest of smugglers.

Drug traffickers are resourceful, and detecting and monitoring their activities for hand-off to law enforcement requires a constant vigil. JIATF West deploys Navy and Coast Guard air and sea force packages that are proving crucial to efforts to seize illegal drugs and arrest international traffickers. They operate in close coordination with U.S. Customs Service aircraft and other law enforcement forces to ensure a seamless hand-off of suspect targets. The payoff is that drugs are taken out of the supply stream, benefitting the United States and the community of nations.

JFQ

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The National Drug Control Strategy* (Washington: The White House, February 1997), pp. 10-15.

<sup>2</sup> *Consult with America: A Look at How Americans View the Country's Drug Problem*, summary report (Rockville, Md.: Gallup Organization, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> *The National Drug Control Strategy*, p. 10, and *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* (Washington: Department of State, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Modeling the Demand for Cocaine* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Molly Moore, "Latin Drugs Flow North Via Pacific," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 1997, p. A1.

<sup>7</sup> *The National Drug Control Strategy*, p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, p. 261.

<sup>9</sup> *Worldwide Maritime Challenges 1997* (Washington: Office of Naval Intelligence, 1997), p. 10.

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